

# **The Importance of Nutrition and Physical Activity in the Prevention of Obesity and Other Chronic Diseases**

## **A Joint Statement**

Chronic diseases account for 7 of every 10 U.S. deaths and for more than 75% of medical care expenditures. In addition, the prolonged illness and disability associated with many chronic diseases decrease the quality of life for millions of Americans.

Much of the chronic disease burden is preventable. Physical inactivity and unhealthy eating contribute to obesity, cancer, cardiovascular disease, arthritis and diabetes. Only tobacco use causes more preventable deaths than physical inactivity and poor nutrition in the United States. People who avoid behaviors that increase their risk for chronic diseases can expect to live healthier and longer lives.

### **The Obesity Epidemic**

Rates of overweight and obesity have risen to epidemic levels over the past 20 years in the United States and in Wisconsin. One in every five Wisconsin adults is obese (21%) and more than half (59%) are either overweight or obese. Between 1990 and 2003, the rate of adult obesity nearly doubled from 11% to 21%. Obese adults are more likely to have chronic conditions than adults with a healthy weight. Obese adults are six times more likely to have diabetes and twice as likely to suffer from arthritis. The annual obesity-related medical expenditures in Wisconsin is estimated at \$1.486 billion. Almost half of these costs are born by taxpayers through the Medicare and Medicaid Program (\$626 million).

Moreover, this epidemic is not limited to adults, 24% of Wisconsin students 9<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grade are at risk of overweight or are overweight. Overweight adolescents have a 1.5 to 2-fold increased risk of being overweight as adults. As a result, they are also at increased risk for long-term medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, diabetes, arthritis and asthma. Our youngest citizens have also been impacted by overweight, 11.8% of low income children aged 2- <5 years are overweight and 15% are at risk of overweight. Overweight and obesity affects certain populations such as low income, elderly, African American and Hispanic, at a disproportionate rate.

### **Nutrition**

The Healthy People 2010 nutrition chapter begins with the following statement: *“Nutrition is essential for growth and development, health, and well-being. Behaviors to promote health should start early in life with breastfeeding and continue through life with the development of healthful eating habits.”*

However, only 69.9% of Wisconsin infants are breastfed at birth, 35.1% are breastfed at 6 months of age and 14% are breastfed at 12 months of age. Exclusive and sustained breastfeeding is the level most beneficial for preventing obesity and other chronic diseases. For infants who are breastfed at least 3 months, 42.1% are exclusively breastfed and those who are breastfed at least 6 months, 16.0% are exclusively breastfed.

Consumption of at least 5 to 9 servings of fruits and vegetables per day has been shown to have a protective affect against certain cancers, a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and high blood

pressure and is an effective strategy to prevent obesity. Fruits and vegetables are excellent sources of a variety of nutrients and other substances that are important to good health. They are also rich in fiber, low in fat and calories. Despite the wealth of information on the benefits of fruits and vegetable consumption, only 21.5% of Wisconsin adults consume 5 or more servings per day and only 28% of Wisconsin high school students consume 5 or more servings per day.

Another alarming trend is that many Wisconsin residents do not have sufficient food or food of adequate quality available to their families. During the period 1996-2000, almost 9% of Wisconsin households were food insecure (uncertain or limited access to food through normal channels), almost one-third of poor households were food insecure, one-third of single-mother households were food insecure and 30% of African American households were food insecure. In 2003, 15% of Wisconsin high school students reported not eating breakfast at all in the last 7 days and 62% of students went two or more days without breakfast.

Across the country there has been an increase in the consumption of sweetened beverages, more meals and food are eaten away from home, an increase in portion size and a higher contribution of calories from fat. While these factors alone do not account for the rise in obesity, they do contribute to an imbalance of energy where more calories are taken in than expended.

### **Physical Activity**

Regular physical activity reduces people's risk for heart attack, cancer, diabetes, and high blood pressure, and may reduce their risk for stroke. It also helps to control weight; contributes to healthy bones, muscles, and joints; reduces falls among older adults; helps to relieve the pain of arthritis; reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression; and is associated with fewer hospitalizations, physician visits, and medications. Moreover, physical activity need not be strenuous to be beneficial; people of all ages benefit from moderate physical activity, such as 30 minutes of brisk walking five or more times a week.

Despite the proven benefits of physical activity, only 52.3% of Wisconsin adults get the recommended amount of physical activity (moderate intensity activity for at least 30 minutes on at least 5 days per week); 20.6% are not active at all in their leisure time. Insufficient physical activity is not limited to adults. More than a third of young people in grades 9–12 do not regularly engage in vigorous physical activity.

### **Contributing Factors**

There is no one change that has led to the alarming increase in obesity. It is a complex and diverse set of factors from lack of sustained and exclusive breastfeeding to how we design our cities and neighborhoods. A changing environment has broadened our food options and eating habits. Portion sizes have increased as well as easy access to high calorie, low nutrient food choices. The number of meals eaten away from home has also increased. There has also been a decrease in opportunities for routine physical activity. Many neighborhoods aren't safe or accessible to walk or bike to work and school resulting in more trips being made by cars. Workdays are longer and lifestyles are busier reducing the time available for physical activity and healthy eating. Even our children have fewer opportunities to be active as physical education time in schools has decreased and screen time (television, computer, video games) has increased.

We live in a technology rich environment and are influenced by media and marketing. Marketing is used to influence the choices of children and adults to "sell" a product or concept. This

influence can be both positive and negative. Campaigns, coupled with supporting interventions, which portray healthy lifestyles as the norm have been very successful at increasing awareness and changing behavior.

### **Call to action**

This epidemic did not occur overnight and it will not be eliminated overnight. The Division of Public Health Chronic Disease Prevention Programs have identified strategies to decrease obesity, improve nutrition and increase physical activity through their strategic plans. Because obesity is a community issue, one that cannot be adequately addressed by any one program or intervention numerous partners must address this issue through policy change and the implementation of interventions that promote behavior changes in individuals, families, organizations and communities. Promoting regular physical activity and healthy eating and creating an environment that supports these behaviors are essential to reducing this epidemic of obesity.

**Through this joint statement the following organizations are affirming the need for all of us to work together to promote and support improved nutrition and increased physical activity among all Wisconsin residents.**

- American Cancer Society
- American Diabetes Association, Wisconsin
- American Heart Association, Greater Midwest Affiliate
- Arthritis Foundation, Wisconsin Chapter
- Aspirus Wausau Heart Institute
- Bureau of Aging and Disability Resources
- Children's Health Alliance of Wisconsin
- Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, Diabetes Clinic
- Diabetes and Wellness Foundation
- Energize Eau Claire County
- Healthy Lifestyles Initiative, Marshfield Clinic
- Latino Health Organization, Inc.
- Marquette University, School of Dentistry
- Memorial Health Center
- MetaStar, Inc.
- National Park Service – Rivers & Trails Program
- Physicians Plus Insurance Corporation
- Quad Graphics
- Sheboygan County Coalition for Kids' Activity and Nutrition
- University of Wisconsin Extension, Family Living Programs
- Waupaca County NuAct Coalition
- Wisconsin Action for Healthy Kids
- Wisconsin Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance
- Wisconsin Chiropractic Association
- Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
- Wisconsin Arthritis Action Council
- Wisconsin Arthritis Program
- Wisconsin Association of School Boards
- Wisconsin Cardiovascular Health Program
- Wisconsin Dental Association
- Wisconsin Diabetes Advisory Group
- Wisconsin Diabetes Prevention and Control Program
- Wisconsin Dietetic Association
- Wisconsin Geriatric Education Center
- Wisconsin Maternal and Child Health and Children with Special Health Care Needs Programs
- Wisconsin Nutrition and Physical Activity Program
- Wisconsin Nutrition and Physical Activity Workgroup
- Wisconsin Physical Therapy Association
- Wisconsin Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant Program
- Wisconsin Society of Podiatric Medicine
- Wisconsin Tobacco Prevention and Control Program
- Wisconsin Walks, Inc.
- Wisconsin WIC Program

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